

[Ambassador Cathy Russell on #Africa4Her](#)

Cathy Russell serves as the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. Previously she served at the White House, coordinating the development of the Obama Administration's strategy to prevent and respond to gender-based violence globally. Join Ambassador Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) for a Twitter #YALICHAT on Wednesday, March 2nd at 13:30 UTC. Additional details below.

U.S. Ambassador Cathy Russell Amb. 
Russell in a meeting with Wanjira Mathai, the Director, Partnerships for Women's Entrepreneurship in Renewables (wPOWER) at the 2015 Global Entrepreneurship Summit in Kenya. (State Department Photo)

The United States invests in women and girls for many of the reasons we invest in young African leaders: it's the right thing to do, and it's the smart thing to do.

When policies and programs consider women and girls, they're more successful. They promote stronger democracies and more durable peace agreements. They increase food security and make for healthier families. They improve public service delivery. And they lead to fewer conflicts and more rapidly growing economies.

As the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, it's my job to work with my colleagues across the U.S. government and with leaders around the world to advance the status of women and girls. As President Obama [said in his trip to Kenya and Ethiopia last summer](#), countries won't get ahead unless they include and empower women and girls.

That's why every day I talk with government officials, world leaders, and women and girls about how we can work together to help women and girls achieve their full potential.

In that past year alone, we've made some exciting progress to advance the status of women and girls. Here are just three of the main areas where we're focused on making a difference.

Education

Last March, the President and First Lady announced Let Girls Learn, a U.S. government initiative that addresses a range of challenges that prevent adolescent girls from attending and completing school.

As part of Let Girls Learn, the United States supported a [Women in Science \(WiSci\) camp](#) in Rwanda last summer. For three weeks, 120 girls from nine countries learned valuable skills in science, technology, engineering, art and design, and mathematics (STEAM).

Health and safety

Education is one way to help empower women and girls. But it takes a complete approach to get the job done—one that considers issues like health and safety, in addition to education. That's why the United States is also working with Tanzania and Malawi to support women and girls from several angles.

In addition to focusing on education, our efforts will also tackle gender-based violence and health challenges like HIV/AIDS. Malawi and Tanzania are [DREAMS](#) (Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe) countries, which means they are part of a partnership between the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Nike Foundation to tackle HIV/AIDS.

Entrepreneurship

Financial independence can make an incredible difference for women and their communities. Women are more likely to invest their earnings back into their family, paying for things like their kids' education and immunizations. And when they own their own business, women are more likely to hire other women, so empowering women entrepreneurs has a multiplier effect within communities.

That's why we're focused on empowering women entrepreneurs. Over the past year, the United States has opened physical centers that offer resources to women entrepreneurs in Zambia and Kenya. And just last week I joined Kiva to launch the [Women's Entrepreneurship Fund](#), which will expand access to finance for women entrepreneurs in 84 countries.

The fact is that it will take all of us - men and women, boys and girls - to achieve the progress we need to help women and girls achieve their full potential. But if every one of us takes action, we can make real and lasting progress for gender equality.

You can help make this possible. [Take the #Africa4Her pledge](#) and tell us how you will invest in women and girls. Show us how you will raise, educate, protect, support, mentor, and elevate the many women and girls of courage in your life.

[Join the YALICHAT](#) on Wednesday, March 2 at:

12:30-13:30 Cape Verde Time (CVT)

13:30-14:30 UTC/GMT


14:30-15:30 West Africa Time (WAT)

15:30-16:30 Central Africa (CAT) and South Africa Standard Time (SAST)

18:30-19:30 Eastern Africa Time (EAT)

19:30-20:30 Seychelles and Mauritius (SCT/MUT)


Women's Situation Rooms: Women Protecting Women's Voting Rights

Liberians celebrate the inauguration of 
President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.
Liberia's 2011 election was the first to use a
Women's Situation Room. (©AP Images)

While Nigerians went to the polls in March 2015 for what would prove to be [historic elections](#), 40 young people in Abuja, mostly women, answered phones around the clock, fielding calls about outbreaks of violence and voter suppression.

Meanwhile, 300 female [election monitors](#) observed polls in 10 targeted Nigerian states, reporting irregularities back to Abuja. There, a team of eight eminent women from Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Senegal worked with political parties and religious groups to address threats of violence against women voters and women candidates as they happened.

Welcome to the Women's Situation Room. Nigeria's election was the most recent African election to benefit from a four-year-old idea that's been spreading throughout the continent. Originated during the 2011 presidential and legislative elections in Liberia to promote women's leadership development, the Women's Situation Room model has been replicated in Senegal, Sierra Leone, Mali and Guinea-Bissau.

Participants in Nigeria's Women's 
Situation Room during the March 2015
elections. (Courtesy U.S. Embassy Nigeria)

Studies show that women and children are the most likely to be affected by election violence, including efforts to prevent women from exercising their right to vote. Women's Situation Rooms employ women and youth to ensure access to the polls.

Among the desks in Nigeria's Women's Situation Room was one staffed with police representatives and another with representatives from Nigeria's Independent Electoral Commission, allowing immediate response to outbreaks of violence and incidents of voter exclusion.

"If a situation happens in the field and we want answers from the police — like violence erupted in a certain state while [women] were taking part in the election — we respond by finding the particular arm of government, INEC or police, to tackle the situation. If they're in the room, it's of course easier and faster," Turrie Akerele Ismael, Nigeria's solicitor-general and one of the situation room's eminent women, reported to U.N. Women.

"Women and youth play an active role in sustaining peace before, during and after the elections," said Sylvie Ndongmo of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which coordinated the Women's Situation Room for the Nigerian election. When civic groups work with governmental agencies to reduce threats to voters and candidates, said Ndongmo, "the threat of electoral violence becomes an opportunity for promoting sustainable peace and democracy."

Gender Equality Key to Growth

Gender equality is critical to economic growth.

That's the conclusion of the new World Bank report *Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity*.

The bank estimates that not giving women and girls access to education, ignoring sexual violence and condoning adolescent pregnancy are ways of disempowering women and girls and together can cost a country nearly 4 percent of its annual economy.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank, experts acknowledge that social norms have a role in limiting women. Yet, "what one group says is a cultural norm is not necessarily what all the groups will say is the social norm," said World Bank President Jim Kim. Further, he said, norms are often used as "a way of justifying very unequal power relations."

The report says the good news is that "social norms can and do change." It says governments and communities can kick-start that change by providing women and girls with life-skills training, sexual and reproductive health education, mentoring, wages equal to what men are paid and wages for traditionally unpaid work like caregiving.

"Removing constraints and unleashing women's full productive potential can yield enormous dividends that help make whole societies more resilient and more prosperous," the report states.

The report says that when women delay marriage past adolescence, they have greater educational achievement and longer life expectancies that benefit their children's health and education.

It also notes that the number of countries that recognize domestic violence as a crime has risen from close to zero in the mid-1970s to 76 today. "In countries with legislation against domestic violence, women's acceptance of wife beating is lower," it states.

It says that when more women are elected to office, "policy-making increasingly reflects the priorities of families and women." And it says that property ownership can enhance women's capacity to make decisions about their lives, increase their social status, amplify their voices about issues of interest in their communities and increase their bargaining power within households.

The report notes that progressive constitutions and legal reforms can support the transformation of social norms. It states that expanding economic opportunities for women "may be one of the most visible and game-changing events in the life of modern households and all communities."

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